

VZCZCXRO0622  
RR RUEHAST RUEHBZ RUEHDH RUEH DU RUEHGI RUEHHM RUEHJO RUEHLN RUEHMA  
RUEHMR RUEHPA RUEHPB RUEHPOD RUEHRN RUEHTM RUEHTRO  
DE RUEHYD #0449 1420636  
ZNR UUUUU ZZH  
R 220636Z MAY 09  
FM AMEMBASSY YAOUNDE  
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 9906  
INFO RUEHRO/AMEMBASSY ROME 0322  
RUEHZO/AFRICAN UNION COLLECTIVE  
RUEHZN/ENVIRONMENT SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY COLLECTIVE  
RUEHC/DEPT OF INTERIOR WASHDC

UNCLAS YAOUNDE 000449

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: N/A  
TAGS: [SENV](#) [KCOR](#) [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [CM](#)  
SUBJECT: ITALIAN LOGGER BUSTED FOR CHIMP POSSESSION

Ref 07 Yaounde 539

1. (U) Summary. Cameroonian law enforcement officials arrested Italian national and logging executive Mirko Ramoni on May 14 for possession of controlled wildlife and wildlife products, including three live chimps and the skin of a freshwater crocodile. The Last Great Ape (LAGA), a wildlife law enforcement NGO that has received support from the USG in the past, conducted surveillance on the suspect and accompanied the Cameroonian officials at every step of the operation. If convicted, Ramoni faces up to three years in prison and up to 10,000,000 CFA (about \$20,000 in fines). This is not the first case implicating a foreign national working in Cameroon's forestry sector, and past experience suggests police and judicial authorities will face political pressure and overtures of corruption to release the suspect or grant him lenient treatment. End summary.

An NGO with Teeth  
-----

2. (U) In February, LAGA received a tip that Ramoni, the General Manager of SMK, an Italian logging company operating in Cameroon's Center Region, was purchasing and possessed protected animals, including chimpanzees and antelope. LAGA officials, in coordination with MINFOF, conducted surveillance for three months before obtaining sufficient information to compel MINFOF National Brigade officials to seek a search warrant for Ramoni's residence on SMK premises. On May 14, officers from the MINFOF National Brigade, accompanied by LAGA officials, searched SMK premises and confiscated three adolescent chimpanzees and one skin of a fresh water crocodile, all of which are protected under Cameroonian wildlife law.

Nexus Between Logging and  
Illegal Wildlife Trade  
-----

3. (U) LAGA Director Ofir Drori told Poloff on May 14 that Romani's arrest is only the most recent in a string of incidents pointing to the implication of logging company officials and the trade in protected wildlife and wildlife products. In early 2008, the MINFOF National Brigade, again working with LAGA, arrested Christos Paschalivis, a Greek national and General Manager of a Greek logging company, for possession of two chimpanzees and an unregistered hunting rifle. The prosecutor reported that he had granted Paschalivis bail, but LAGA's investigators later discovered that Paschalivis paid a 2 million CFA (about \$4,000) bribe to the prosecutor in order to avoid detention. Paschalivis was later convicted of lesser offenses and sentenced to pay a negligible fine. LAGA is helping MINFOF formulate an appeal of the judge's decision.

The Challenge of Justice  
-----

4. (U) Ramoni is being accompanied by MINFOF National Brigade and LAGA representatives to the Court of First Instance in Ntui. On May

15, the prosecutor denied Ramoni's request for bail and ordered him detained over the weekend, pending a formal presentation of charges.

That Ramoni is Italian and that he is implicated in the lucrative and well-connected logging industry, however, leaves Drori concerned that political pressure will be brought to bear to free Ramoni. In addition, LAGA's experience has shown that defendants seek to bribe police or judicial officials in approximately 85 percent of the cases where LAGA is involved.

Comment: LAGA,  
An NGO with a Mission  
-----

15. (U) We have praised LAGA and their model before (reftel), and this arrest is only the most recent in a long string of successes. Drori started LAGA when he learned that Cameroon had never prosecuted a case of wildlife trafficking, despite credible and widespread flaunting of domestic and international law. By operating on a shoe-string budget (LAGA still does not possess a vehicle or proper office space), Drori hopes to demonstrate that weak political will and pervasive corruption, not lack of resources, are to blame for unchecked wildlife trafficking and other law enforcement challenges in Cameroon. To some extent, the Romani case illustrates this point; it required no donor support or increased financing, just that Cameroonian officials--from the National Brigade to the judiciary--carry out their responsibilities. End comment.